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'THE RYANLINE IS NOW OPEN...: TALK RADIO AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE'

SARA O’SULLIVAN

'It used to be the parish pump. But in the Ireland of the 1990s, national radio seems to have taken over as the place where the nation meets' (Frank McNally, *The Irish Times*, 29 November 1995).

'... if radio is genuinely the sound of the nation talking to itself ... we are for the most part a stinking, non-thinking talking-ship of fools' (Jonathan Philbin Bowman, *Sunday Independent*, 5 November 1995).

Talk radio provides a rare opportunity for Irish audiences to participate in mass mediated debate and discussion. Despite the popularity of the genre, it has been given limited attention by Irish sociologists. In this chapter I wish to analyze the forum offered by one Irish talk radio show, *The Gerry Ryan Show*, and to consider the significance of this active audience participation. This discussion is based on a qualitative study of telephone callers to *The Gerry Ryan Show*, involving an analysis of the calls made to the show during the week 9-13 May 1994, and, subsequently, the undertaking of 27 in-depth interviews with these callers.

*The Gerry Ryan Show* is broadcast on 2FM each week-day from 9.00-12.00 and has been on the air since 14 March 1988 (Russell, 1991: 27). It is the most popular show on 2FM, with a reach of 382, 876, and an average 1/4 hour audience of 228, 085 (MRBI, 1995: 81). My interest is in those audience members who call *The Gerry Ryan Show* and participate in this live, on-air discussion. What makes this show particularly interesting is that it offers access to listeners, and in this way allows the audience to participate in meaning making. We have here a clear example of public debate occurring within a media context. This chapter is broadly located within what Corner (1991) terms the 'public knowledge project' and will focus on analysing the kind of participation offered by *The Gerry Ryan Show*. I have used Habermas' concept of the public sphere to help frame this discussion. My interest is in whether *The Gerry Ryan Show* can be
seen as part of the public sphere, or whether the show is 'just' entertainment, masquerading as debate. I am also interested in the space provided by the show for private sphere issues to be raised in a very public forum. I will argue that this study does not offer any evidence to support the suggestion that The Gerry Ryan Show is part of the public sphere, as defined by Habermas. However it would be wrong to see the show simply as entertainment. Callers to The Gerry Ryan Show may not be engaging in rational-critical debate, but their participation must be systematically analyzed, rather than being dismissed.

Most of the American research on talk radio has taken a functionalist approach to the genre, and the focus has been on audience uses and gratifications. This work can be divided into two main areas. Talk radio is often thought of in relation to its democratic functions; researchers have focused on the role talk radio plays in keeping listeners up-to-date with political issues, and how talk radio shows provide a forum where these issues can be discussed by ordinary citizens (see Levin, 1987; Hofstetter et al, 1994). In a survey of local households and local leaders in Terre Haute Indiana, Crittenden (1971: 210) found that Speak Out, a local talk radio show, 'certainly seems to stimulate political communication and to formulate political issues to some degree'. Listeners found the programme educational, and frequent listeners were more likely to be involved in local political and civil issues. Crittenden (1971: 209) concludes that this programme 'makes an important democratic contribution' in the Terre Haute area. Verwey (1990: 39) argues that radio call-ins provide public service information for listeners, allow social criticism, and work as an instant 'complaint channel'. An important unintended consequence of Canadian call-in shows 'was their capacity to get regional public works done and public complaints attended to more quickly than ... any other way' (Verwey, 1990: 233).

In a different approach Turrow (1974) introduces the idea that talk radio can be analyzed as a form of interpersonal communication. His hypothesis was that calling a talk radio show is a substitute for the interpersonal contact that is missing in people's lives, due primarily to the problems associated with urban living. Thus 'callers will not mention influencing the audience when asked why they like speaking on radio' (1974: 174). Bierig and Dimmick (1979) also argue
that callers to talk radio shows are seeking human contact rather than trying to mobilize others into action. They do however suggest that the difference between their findings and Crittenden's may be linked to the different functions provided by talk radio shows in different areas. In a smaller community such as Terre Haute it is possible that a lack of interpersonal communication is relatively rare. In their study of a late night talk show it was also found that 'callers were more likely to be single, alone and not a member of any organization' (Bierig and Dimmick, 1979: 92).

Tramer and Jeffres (1983) argue that people use talk radio both as a forum and as a companion. A survey of 181 callers to three different talk shows found that 24 percent called to use the programme as a forum, while 27 percent called to chat. The authors (1983: 300) point out the similarities with the uses made by women of soap operas, which functioned both as an escape outlet, and as a source of information about the problems of everyday life: 'Just as Herzog found radio soap operas functional outlets for escape some forty years ago, today's talk radio formats are providing a similar outlet for today's isolated listeners'.

These studies can all be located within a uses and gratifications perspective. The talk show audience are presented as having found a genre that meets some of their informational or interpersonal 'needs'. Morley (1992: 118) has pointed to the limits of the uses and gratifications perspective, and I would agree that people's responses to the media cannot be understood 'in terms simply of individual psychologies ... [but] are founded on cultural differences embedded within the structure of society - cultural clusters which guide and limit individual's interpretation of messages'. The uses and gratifications theoretical framework was not found to be particularly useful in relation to callers to The Gerry Ryan Show. This study aims to go beyond this type of approach in order to uncover the meaning and significance of participation in The Gerry Ryan Show, both for the individual callers and for the wider audience.

'TYPES' OF CALLS

Calls to The Gerry Ryan Show are not homogenous, and include the bizarre and the entertaining,
as well as the serious. A complex framework is required to include these very different call 'types'. From my analysis of the 83 calls over one week to The Gerry Ryan Show I have identified four 'types' of calls (see Table 1 below), each of which I will discuss in turn. It must be noted that 65 percent of these callers are women; this can be compared to the average audience, which is 57 percent female and 43 percent male (MRBI, 1995: 90).

| TABLE 1 |
| Types of Calls |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call Type</th>
<th>Callers to The Gerry Ryan Show</th>
<th>No. of Research interviews with each 'type.'</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9-13 May</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i)</td>
<td>Expressive Emotive</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii)</td>
<td>Connotive</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Exhibitionist</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Service Encounter</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i)</td>
<td>Advice Seekers</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii)</td>
<td>Asking a question</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv)</td>
<td>Answering a question</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Troubles-Telling</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

The Expressive Call

The expressive call allows the caller to express his or her views on a subject. The call may be emotive, 'concerned to reveal one's own personality and interests' in relation to the subject under discussion, or it may be connotive, 'a means of influencing others' (Crisell, 1986: 183). In the expressive call the mode of discussion is debate, and many of these calls are focused on public sphere issues. The great majority of the 34 expressive calls over this week can be classified as emotive and both men and women are represented in this group. Only two callers can be classified as connotive, that is as trying to influence listeners in some way.

The Exhibitionist Call

In contrast, with an exhibitionist call 'the caller's aim is not so much to vent his opinions on a
particular topic as to project his personality, to become a performer’ (Crisell, 1986: 185). The context of these calls must not be forgotten; callers are ringing a popular radio show and for some callers getting on-air is the purpose for their call. Thirteen calls from this week can be categorized as exhibitionist calls; this is the only grouping where males outnumbered females. These calls usually take the form of either telling an amusing story, or reciting a poem the caller has written. These calls revolve around entertainment not debate. One respondent explains this difference:

..I think it depends on you know the reason why you'd be phoning up [(yeah)] I mean if it was just something like that, just an amusing story I think half the time it's just to be there to tell it, do you know what I mean [(yeah)] and if it's a much more serious topic and you, you know, you're probably more inclined not to be concerned with being on the radio as opposed to, you know you want to put your point across (Caller 21: Englishman, living in rural Ireland, works from home).

The Service Encounter
Parallels can be drawn between some calls and what conversation analysts term the service encounter. The service encounter can be seen as an instrumental encounter, where talking is a means to a non-verbal end; 'the Service Encounter's business may be characterized as Solving a Problem... the focal object is the 'problem and its properties'' (Jefferson and Lee, 1981: 411). The service encounter can deal with advice; here the problem is a personal one, involving self-disclosure, and the five calls in this sub-group (two advice seekers and three advice givers) were all made by women. Another form of service encounter is the question/answer format. The Gerry Ryan Show often features in-studio 'experts' who are there to answer listeners' questions. In the week 9-13 May two such 'experts' appeared on The Gerry Ryan Show. The show also features callers who ring in with practical questions for listeners; as one caller put it, ‘..you tend to go to The Ryan Show because he has a large listenership [(uhum)] (...) I thought there's bound to be somebody out there with an answer’ (Caller 15: unemployed man, living in rural town, but brought up in Dublin).
Troubles telling is an expressive encounter where the talk is an end in itself, and 'the focal object is the 'teller and his experiences'' (Jefferson and Lee, 1981: 411). While troubles telling and service encounter can be seen as quite similar, insofar as both deal with troubles, an important difference between the two is that advice will usually be rejected in a troubles telling, particularly if it comes early on in the discussion. It is inappropriate to respond to a troubles telling with advice; the speaker is aligned as a troubles-teller, not an advice-recipient, and must be allowed to tell the full trouble (Jefferson and Lee, 1980: 410). In the week in question there are four instances where callers have rung the show to recount a trouble. Again these calls frequently involve self-disclosure and this group is also exclusively female. I would argue that this 'type' of call shares characteristics with troubles talk in 'ordinary' conversation, in particular the caller is looking for emotional reciprocity rather than advice. This reciprocity is provided by subsequent callers, who call to recount similar experiences. Gerry Ryan also provides these callers with sympathy and support.

My interest is in the space provided to callers by *The Gerry Ryan Show* to express a 'private' opinion on public matters, and to discuss the 'private' in a very public fashion. This is part of a general trend in Western society identified by Meyrowitz: 'private and public behavior are no longer separated. People's personal feelings are shown - visually on television, audibly on the radio' (Reiner, 1995: 67). Therefore I wish to focus on expressive calls, and those calls involving self-disclosure, namely troubles-telling and advice seeking/ advice-giving. Here I shall be drawing extensively on my interviews with those who called *The Gerry Ryan Show* during this week. I am interested in two related issues, whether talk radio can be seen as a public sphere, and what the significance of this public discussion of private matters might be. To help frame this discussion I will briefly introduce Jurgen Habermas' work on the public sphere. I will then move onto a presentation of each of these two caller groupings, followed by a discussion of the participation offered to these very different kinds of callers, by *The Gerry Ryan Show*.

**THE PUBLIC SPHERE**
In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989), Habermas analyzes the rise and the fall of the eighteenth century public sphere. He begins his discussion by locating the bourgeois public sphere within a general model of state and society.

**TABLE 2**

Social Realms in the Eighteenth Century (adapted from Habermas, 1989: 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private Realm</th>
<th>Sphere of Public Authority</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor)</td>
<td>Public sphere in the political realm of the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjugal family's internal space</td>
<td>Public sphere in the world of letters (clubs, press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Town&quot; (market of culture products)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State (realm of the &quot;police&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Court (courty-noble society)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Habermas argues that in the eighteenth century there was a clear division between what he terms the 'private realm', and what he terms the 'sphere of public authority'. Within the private realm Habermas differentiates between the private sphere, consisting of the family and the economy, and the bourgeois public sphere, 'a public sphere constituted by private people' (1989: 30). In this bourgeois public sphere 'private citizens debate issues of public concern... in an environment free of power relations', where the force of the better argument wins (McLaughlin, 1993: 601). Discussion centered on issues of the common good, and involved 'the problematization of areas that until then had ... remained a preserve in which church and state authorities had the monopoly of interpretation' (Habermas, 1989: 36). Habermas locates the public sphere in the world of letters, in the coffee houses and salons of eighteenth century Europe. He argues that debate here was shaped by the reading material read by individuals, and that novels and newspapers served as 'organs of public information and debate' (McCarthy, 1989: xii).

Habermas argues that both the private and the public spheres were transformed with the development of the welfare state. He focuses on two main developments here, both involve a breakdown of the separation between state and society that can be seen in Table 2. Firstly the

state penetrated the private sphere; here he simply means that the development of the welfare state involved state intervention in both the family and the realm of commodity exchange and social labour. The second development he notes involves 'organised private interests' invading the public sphere (1989: 179). These organised private interests would include public relations companies, special interest groups, political parties and so on, that is groups that are 'not representative of the interests of private people as the public' (Habermas, 1989: 189). This development is significant as it changes the nature of the public sphere. The public sphere becomes a forum for competition between these private interests; this precludes any orientation to the common good, a key requirement for the public sphere. The net result is that the public sphere 'becomes the court before whose public prestige can be displayed - rather than in which public critical debate is carried out' (Habermas, 1989: 201). The public sphere becomes 'a public sphere in appearance only' (Habermas, 1989: 171). He also identifies a move from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public (Habermas, 1989: 159-62).

There are numerous problems with Habermas' account of the degradation of the public sphere and it is certainly doubtful whether his account is historically accurate (see for example Ryan 1993; Eley, 1993). Feminist scholars point to the patriarchal character of the bourgeois public sphere and argue that a central feature of this model is women's exclusion from this rational-critical debate, and their relegation to the private sphere. However the link Habermas identifies between mass mediated communication and democratic politics is of interest in relation to talk radio. The mass media are central to any discussion of the contemporary public sphere. Kress (1986) argues that the potential for dialogue exists in relation to talk radio, although the caller always remains in a position of disadvantage, as control ultimately rests with the host (see also Moss and Higgins, 1986; Avery and McCain, 1986; Karpf, 1980). The first question I wish to address is whether The Gerry Ryan Show can be seen as part of the public sphere. Here I will draw on my interviews with expressive callers.

The second question that will be considered is whether self-disclosure in the public sphere can be seen as emancipatory, or as part of what Habermas (1987) terms the colonization of the life-
world by the system.\textsuperscript{13} Some writers dispute Habermas' insistence that discussion in the public sphere should be confined to issues of general concern, as this works to situate the private sphere 'outside the realm of justice' (Benhabib, 1993: 92). Fraser argues that both public and private 'are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. In political discourse they are powerful terms frequently deployed to delegitimate some interests, views and topics and to valorize others' (1993: 131). Labelling something as private excludes it from debate.\textsuperscript{14} As a result, the 'private domain, women's traditional 'sphere', is very often the realm of the oblique and unspoken' (Meaney, 1993: 241). A belief that private sphere issues should not be automatically excluded from the public sphere is central to feminist thinking, as is suggested by the slogan 'the personal is the political'. The feminist emancipatory project involves the renegotiation of public and private boundaries, in order to make 'what were hitherto considered private matters of the good life into public issues of justice' (Benhabib, 1993: 92). Fraser sees the opening up of the private sphere as an emancipatory process. As private needs come into public view they 'loose their illusory aura of naturalness, as their interpretations become subject to critique and contestation' (Fraser, 1989: 160). Habermas, on the other hand, is pessimistic about this 'floodlit privacy', which he views as a symptom of 'the destruction of the relationship between public and private spheres' (1989: 158-9). We have here two very different ways of viewing this 'opening-up' of the private sphere.

**EXPRESSIVE CALLS**

Callers in this group had rung the show to disagree with points others had made (7 callers), to express agreement (2 callers), or to add a new point to the discussion (3 callers). The mode of discussion here is debate, and callers offer different forms of evidence to support their contributions. Some callers offer no 'proof' to support their opinion, but instead draw on traditional norms or values. This caller is clearly appealing to traditional norms about femininity:

\begin{quote}
Em just I suppose, just on impulse when I heard the people saying, some people saying it [body hair on women] was attractive and saying would they not think it was attractive,
\end{quote}
just you know I didn't think it was attractive so I just thought I'd say it (Caller 19: Dublin woman, working in the home).

Similarly, although this male caller claims his contribution is factual and objective, it is clear that it is not a 'fact' but a belief or an opinion that he is expressing:

Just about the fact that eh you know there could be an attempt made on him [Nelson Mandela] or whatever, you know. Em on his life, you know (...) em, well it's not so much that I feel strongly on the issue of South Africa. I feel strongly that too many people are being naive about the whole thing (...) People have got to be objective about the whole thing and see it from both sides of the coin rather than sort of saying oh its terrific for the black community, you know that em there is going to be trouble (Caller 2: Rural man, self-employed).

In contrast other callers draw on their own experiences or observations to support their point. For these callers, the show allows them to challenge statements which contradict their own lived experience; these calls have a powerful authenticity. One woman called to disagree with two previous callers who were arguing that women were useless drivers; to support her argument she explained ‘..I drive for a living, I'm a taxi driver..' (Caller 18: rural woman). Gerry Ryan offered support to a caller making similar claims: ‘..you should know, you do 1,000 miles a week..' . Another caller draws on her childhood experiences to back up her point:

Em well there was a lot of violence in 'The Family', you know and somebody rang up Gerry and said Charlo is not a real person, and things like that don't happen. And they do, I was reared in that, I seen it you know. And there's a lot of children out there still being physically abused and mentally tortured, you know [(uhum)].15 (Caller 25: Dublin woman, self-employed).

The 'Set-Up'

The topic that attracted the most callers during the week was the discussion about women
drivers, introduced by caller 5. This call provoked quite a response both from women and other
men and the topic ran for the rest of the week. However all was not as it seemed; although
several times during the week Gerry Ryan commented that he was surprised that this one was
still running, this call was apparently set-up by the show:16

..But in reality when I rang The Gerry Ryan Show I rang to say could you find out where
they get those statistics from, that women are proven to be better drivers than men (...) so
the next morning a guy rang me back and said, The Gerry Ryan Show, blah, blah, blah,
you were on yesterday about women drivers and I said yeah and he said well, could you
go on the air today and really stir it up [(laughs)] you know he kind of said well we want
you to go on and gizz people up, you know, not just get on with a straight face and say,
where did those statistics come from, but we want you to get on - I knew what he was
saying, you know. He wanted me to go on and condemn women drivers into the ground
and in other words aggravate the women driving population of Ireland. [(uhum)] Just to
stir things up, which is really what his show is all about, you know. So eh I did and then it
took off from there.. (Caller 5: Dublin man, sells telecommunications equipment).
So, although this caller had rung in with a quite serious question, someone working on the show
saw the call had the potential to 'gizz people up' and he was only too happy to oblige. It is
interesting that the call backfired on him and had real world consequences that he had not
anticipated:

But eh I was surprised that a few friends of mine (...) suddenly jumping down my throat
[(uhum, uhum)] (...) Normally these are people who would be very calm and collected
and weigh up all possibilities and let you be entitled to your opinion without getting
uptight about it. [(uhum)] But in this case I was entitled to nothing [(laughs)] [(uhum)] I
was just slaughtered, you know (Caller 5).
He invokes the democratic ideal of freedom of speech here, but does not see the irony in
discussing his experience as if the call was not a set-up.
This caller has a very negative view of the participation offered by the show. This is not surprising given his experience of calling the show. For him stirring things up 'is really what his show is all about'. However he moves beyond his own experience of calling and suggests that the show is about manipulation not participation. The show works because Gerry Ryan turns all callers into good radio material, no matter what their original purpose for ringing was, 'he has a wonderful ability for someone just to ring up off the street and suddenly make an engrossing story out of them, just on the spot, instantaneously [(uhum)]' (Caller 5). All credit goes to Gerry Ryan; he has the talent to make mundane calls engrossing. After all the purpose of the show is entertainment. It can be argued that this challenges the idea that *The Gerry Ryan Show* can be seen as a valuable forum.¹⁷

*The Gerry Ryan Show* as Public Sphere?

*The Gerry Ryan Show* can be said to provide a space for these expressive callers to air what they think. Furthermore it is ordinary people's views and not those of 'experts' that are broadcast. One respondent makes this distinction clearly:

I think its important, you know, so many people, so many people, you know, you get a good understanding of other people's points of view and general public's point of view on a certain topic [(uhum)] (…) I think that's important, because you know usually when you're listening to em, em, television programmes and radio programmes all you are hearing is reported views of people in the business [(uhum)] And its, you know, I think public opinion is very important and I think its good that you can, you know get a chance to hear it and air your own points of view (Caller 21: Englishman, living in rural Ireland, works from home).

This can be seen as important given the widespread fear that the life-world is being colonized by 'experts' (see Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). However on this evidence I find it difficult to be
optimistic about the participation taken up by these expressive callers. The show may allow for
the expression of different opinions, but, from the evidence of this week, this is at the expense of
any critical discussion of social and political issues. Furthermore, as Calhoun argues,
communication in a public sphere is 'not merely sharing what people already think or know but a
process of potential transformation in which reason is advanced by debate itself' (1993: 29). The
rules of debate in the public sphere demand that 'arguments are analysed rather than simply aired'
(Livingstone and Lunt, 1992: 14). These findings lend support to Tuchmann's argument that
'modern media may encourage citizens to know more, even to be more opinionated, but to do less
about public affairs' (cited in Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 15). As one respondent puts it:

It wasn't really a very serious conversation that people were going to come to blows over,
you know. It was really just opinions [(yeah)] (...) Two different points of view and that
was that... (Caller 12: Rural man, self-employed and works from home).

Crucially it can be argued that this expression of public opinion is not translated into social or
political action. Only two callers in this grouping were looking for any action consequences from
their call to the show. One of these explains the response she was hoping for when she made
the call:

/ But em the morning that I rang Gerry Ryan I was hoping that a nun or a priest would ring
up and say right we can look into this, look into areas and we'll actually do something for
children. They didn't. But I was glad that I did put that little thought out there and hoping
that somebody would ring up and argue with me, you know. [(uhum)] Gerry might even
ask me back and I'd argue with them. I'd tell them to do this and that that does goes on
and that they don't bother looking into it (Caller 25: Dublin woman, self-employed).

I Uhum, uhum. So were you disappointed that it didn't go on any further?

/ A little bit, yeah. I was. Like that's not Gerry's fault. He was there open and ready to take
it, but it just proves my point.

This caller hoped she would provoke those in authority to respond. No one picked up on this and
there were no more calls on 'The Family' that day (11 May). It is interesting that the caller blames
those who she felt should have responded and this disappointment does not affect her attitude towards Gerry Ryan.

The show does offer access to its listeners and as such positions the audience as citizens, not simply consumers. All listeners are included in Gerry Ryan's invitation to phone the show, from anywhere in Ireland for the price of a local call: 'The Ryanline is now open on 1-850-... You tell us and we'll tell them'. Talk radio therefore allows minority groups the possibility of speaking 'rather than only being spoken about' (Kress, 1986: 417). However, in practice access to the show is controlled by those working on the show and callers must make it past the show's broadcasting assistants. This control on participation makes it difficult to see how the show might have a contribution to make to the public sphere, where, in theory at least, access should be open to all (Habermas, 1989: 37). Furthermore the discovery of a 'set-up' raises some serious questions about how this on-air debate is managed, or perhaps even manipulated. It must also be acknowledged that although RTE is a public service broadcaster, a significant proportion (51 percent) of its revenue comes from advertising (RTE, 1995: 22). The main purpose of The Gerry Ryan Show is to attract as many listeners as possible, rather than to provide a forum for debate. To keep its listenership high the show must be entertaining. The production team are proud of the 'zany' reputation that the show enjoys, and are wary of 'boring' material (see Russell, 1991). The main news stories of the day are seen as RTE Radio 1's 'turf'. The show attracts an audience on the basis that it is different to The Gay Byrne Show, Liveline or The Pat Kenny Show. Entertainment then can be seen as the key production value, and the team would seem to take the position that while rational-critical debate does not always make 'good' radio, 'crack' does.

Finally, on a more positive note, The Gerry Ryan Show can be seen to offer more to the daytime listener than its 'pop and prattle' predecessors. Radio stations have tended to view daytime listeners as housewives and consumers, with limited interests. As Barnard (1989: 143) has noted,

We [Essex Radio, UK] call our average listener Doreen... Doreen isn't stupid but she's
only listening with half an ear, and doesn't necessarily understand long words. That
doesn't mean that we treat her like a fool but that we make sure she understands first time.
The Gerry Ryan Show does not presume either that its listeners are all women, which of course
they are not, or that those women who are listening have limited interests and are uninterested in
public sphere issues. Instead the show keeps listeners up-to-date with important social, political
and moral issues. Over recent years the show has dealt at length with range of weighty topics,
covering international, national and local issues. These have included, for example, child sexual
abuse, the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society, rape, domestic violence, the war in the
former Yugoslavia, French nuclear testing in the Pacific, conditions in Romanian and Chinese
orphanages, the Beef Tribunal, Travellers' rights, environmental issues, and so on. These topics
have not been dealt with in a trivial manner, and so it would be wrong to see the show simply as
providing entertainment.

SELF-DISCLOSURE: TROUBLES TELLING AND THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER

For other callers The Gerry Ryan Show offers a space in the public sphere where matters of
public concern may be discussed with others in similar situations. Here experience is privileged
and it is people's own direct experience of the topic that motivates and legitimates their call to the
show. It is the callers who are setting the agenda with these calls and it is primarily other listeners
they are addressing rather than Gerry Ryan; callers are looking for a response from others who
have experienced what they are currently going through (advice-seekers/givers), or are sharing
their own experience with a previous caller (troubles telling). The key mechanism here is
identification rather than debate and there is a consensus among these callers that the show can
help people overcome everyday troubles.

For those calling with a problem the call can be seen as an active strategy to gain information,
advice or support. The show is one of a number of possible sources of help. For one of these
callers The Gerry Ryan Show is a last hope:

Its just I was fed up going to doctors (...) and getting no answer. So I heard Gerry a couple of times helping people on the radio with different, you know, subjects and things, about children and that, so I said well, blast it, I might as well try him. He was only the last resort.. (Caller 4: Rural woman, working in the home).

This caller found others' experiences reassuring:

..when you go into a doctor and you say to him about vertigo, he'll say you've an infection in your inner ear and you've to put up with it and that was that. (...) But when I phoned Gerry as I said to you he said 'Well maybe there's someone else suffering with it', and then there was someone else and then there was another lady, she came on. There were I think four or five that morning. It was great to listen to them all having the same problem. I knew I wasn't an outcast (Caller 4).

So the other callers helped alleviate the isolation that this woman was feeling, and also gave her some idea of what she could expect from her illness.

Those who responded to these calls explained that it was their own experience of the subject that prompted them to ring. Following from Weiss these callers can be termed 'fellow participants', who 'can offer the immediate understanding that comes only from being in the same boat' (1976: 11):

She [caller 4] just seemed to have, you know she was puzzled, will this go on kind of thing, she was nervous and being through it I just rang up to tell her that once they got her on the right medication (...) she'd be ok. I wanted to put her out of that situation, you know that kind of a way? (Caller 3: Dublin woman, semi-invalid).

This woman identified with caller 4's situation, she too suffers from vertigo and was eager to do what she could to help her. Another advice-giver offers a different motive for ringing. She had heard a previous call and felt that it would have frightened her when she was first diagnosed:
..the second caller, she would have frightened the wits out of me. She seemed despondent and made it seem so bad (...) I felt I'd have to, I had to ring, to let the first caller [caller 4] know that you can adjust your life to it and you do learn to live with it and that was my reason for calling. So, eh, I hoped at the time it was of some consolation to the first caller [caller 4] [(uhum)] (...) she was a middle-aged person like myself and I didn't want her to think that well, because she got it and there was no cure for it she might as well be dead..

(Caller 6: Dublin woman, working in the home).

This caller doubly identifies with the woman who is seeking advice; both suffer from vertigo and both are middle-aged. Thus she sees her experience as more relevant than the caller she refers to here, who was in her twenties. It is interesting that she does not hint at this disagreement while on-air and this only comes through during the interview. The caller is not trying to prove that she is correct and that the previous caller was wrong. Instead her focus is on her own experience of the condition and she hopes that this will console caller 4.

The ethos here is comparable to that of a self-help group. Experts are excluded; help comes from those 'fellow participants' who have previously experienced same problem, and so are the best qualified people to help:

..Its all very well talking to professionals (...) [but] its like an Al Anon meeting or an AA, if you can eh identify with someone well then you'd say 'Well, that was me', and you'd kind of say 'Well, what did she do?'. Well then you can go from there. But when you have the, the professionals in they're telling you how to do it. Its just going over the surface I think. Whereas if you get in deep, in and somebody identifies, you can go from there

(Caller 24: Dublin woman, self-employed).

Calling is a practical way to help others:

..I feel that by my phoning up and being able to tell people, this is what you can do, it helps other people to get around it.. [talking about the difficulties she encountered when
she discovered her husband was a transvestite] (Caller 22: Dublin woman, works in horse stables).

Another important feature of these calls is that they can allow for horizontal communication between listeners. Gerry Ryan sometimes puts callers directly in contact with one another on-air. There is also evidence that callers and listeners get in touch outside of the confines of the show. Another vertigo sufferer got in touch with caller 3 after she had been on-air:

..A gentleman rang me after that. He got in touch with Gerry Ryan and they rang me after that to see if I would talk to him, because seemingly what I said he was going through (...) he thought he had it and he just wanted to talk. [(uhum)] And we talked and he said it was great to talk to someone. So, that time is ( ), I helped someone like that, yes I did (Caller 3: Dublin woman: semi-invalid).

Another respondent tells how as a result of an earlier call she made to the show, about her husband who is a transvestite, one couple in a similar situation contacted her and this led to them meeting:

In fact there was one couple actually contacted me [(uhum)] through your show em and they ended up coming to Dublin to come to the transvestite club with me [(uhum)]. So I mean I feel I've helped that one person if nothing else. And how many people got helped that didn't even contact you or me?.. (Caller 22: Dublin woman, works in horse stables).

Thus participation can have real world consequences.

Respondents also give us a glimpse into the benefits these calls may have for those who listen but do not call. Firstly the show is informative:

You just pick up titbits as well [(yeah)]. Even if its nothing to do with you, somebody might say something to you about so and so and you'd say 'Ah yeah, listen, I heard so and so that you could do such and such about that problem' [(uhum)] (...) He's very
informative apart from being entertaining (Caller 22: Dublin woman, works in horse stables).

It also gives listeners an insight into the problems and suffering of others:

Ah yeah. You could wake up and often in the mornings I wouldn't feel too good in myself and I mean I'd listen to Gerry and I'd hear other people's complaints and I'd say, 'Ah God, you know to meself, you know what you have, you know what you take to cure it', so, you know (Caller 3: Dublin woman: semi-invalid).

..I'm here, I won't say in the lap of luxury, if you seen it! But my family reared and him and I and we've everything we've kind of wanted, built it up over the years and I'm cribbing that I'd love to change this, I'd - there's some poor auld bitch on the radio and she's broken hearted over something really important and it makes me feel low because I'm looking for a new this or a new that and I don't really need it [(uhum)]. The programme makes me stop and listen and say, 'Well thank God for what I have. That poor bitch has nothing'. [(uhum)]. You know, maybe her house has been taken off her or the fellow has ran off and left her in the lurch or with babies. And, you know they're, they're great problems now [(uhum)]. They're the big problems and its lovely that he listens to them (...) It makes the likes of me stop and say, 'Well feck it, I'm happy with what I have, get in and clean it' (Caller 20: Dublin woman, working in the home).

The feeling with which this is said is remarkable. Others' 'big' problems give her a sense of perspective and allow her count her blessings. This respondent has identified something 'really important' herself; it would appear that she is correct and it is usually 'some auld bitch' calling with a personal problem. All the troubles-tellers and advice-seekers from this week are women (see Table 1). Several callers show they are aware that calling is gendered in this way:

..I've heard people, especially women for some strange reason, its probably because they're more emotional than men, and maybe, probably because they ring in the first place, will ring and say they have a problem about something.. (Caller 5: Dublin man,
Furthermore from the evidence of this week it is also women who respond to these calls.

In contrast several male respondents mention that calling the show with a problem is a low status activity. One argues that calling the show looking for help would be a sign that you have no one else to talk to (Caller 5). Another terms calling with a problem 'silly'. Even the word silly has feminine connotations; women and children are called silly, not men:

/ ...I don't think if it was anything in my personal life or problem I'd ring a radio station about it. I think that'd be a bit silly now.

I why silly?

/ Silly? [(yeah)] Why? Eh I think you should be able to sort out your own problems without expecting the nation to ring in [(uhum)] and tell you what to do, like. [(uhum)] I think you should be mature enough to sort out your own problems without going onto the radio and talking about it (Caller 12: Rural man, self-employed & works from home).

Central here is the belief that people should be self sufficient, not dependent on others for help.

Male callers would also seem to have a different sense of what it is appropriate to introduce to the public sphere and what should remain 'private'. This is illustrated quite nicely by one respondent: 'Ah give us a break. I don't want to discuss my personal problems with half a million people in Ireland. I suffer from impotency, please help, me name is ---.' (Caller 7: Dublin man, office worker).

It is not surprising to find that advice-giving is primarily associated with women callers. Advice-giving draws on traditional female competences associated with women's role in the private sphere, where women are used to taking responsibility for others' health and well-being. As Rapping (1991: 36) argues, 'In the sexual division of labour, these matters of emotional and relational caretaking and socialization have always been seen as "women's domain"'. Of course this is not to suggest that these matters are somehow 'female', but simply to point out the
resonance here. This also helps explain the scorn used by the male respondents in relation to this type of call; like most other unpaid work, this ‘caregiving’ has always been undervalued, particularly by men (Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995).

The respondents in the troubles telling and service encounter groupings are very positive about the role the show can play, particularly in relation to its problem-solving, educational and support functions. I am also interested in the significance of this public form of self-disclosure, this 'outpouring of personal information usually only revealed to one's close friends, family, minister, therapist' (Priest and Dominick, 1994: 75). In Ireland over the last thirteen years, major political issues have centered on the private sphere, particularly 'on questions of socio-sexual control' of women's bodies so central to the abortion referenda in 1983 and 1992, and the divorce referenda in 1986 and 1995 (Smyth, 1995: 34). The current affairs debates around both abortion and divorce were essentially dominated by 'experts', politicians, and members of the clergy, while women with first hand experience of these issues were excluded. In relation to abortion, for example, the focus of current affairs programming was on 'how the legal and social institutions should address the question of reproductive rights, while the emotional and personal experience of abortion is deemed relevant only to the private realm' (Fletcher, 1995: 63).

In contrast talk radio provided a space where these, and other, socio-sexual issues could be discussed by those with direct experience of them. This is seen as a positive and empowering development by some commentators. Gibbons has argued, 'The only place that ordinary people could discuss these matters was the despised format of talk radio, which can hold its head high in this regard' (cited in McNally, 1995; see also Fletcher, 1995). Talk radio has also provided a space where ordinary people can use their own experiences to bring the powerful to task directly, rather than by proxy. Lavina Kerwick's harrowing 'phone call to The Gerry Ryan Show, is
probably the most famous example of this. Both these developments would seem like positive developments if viewed from a feminist standpoint (but see Fennell, 1993 for a different view of the Lavinia Kerwick case). Talk radio can be seen as having a role to play in forcing women's private experiences into a very public arena; once these experiences have been articulated, they become much more difficult to ignore. Parallels can be made between this process and the process of 'conscientization':

When people get together and reflect upon their lives... they become aware that they are victims in common together... when people are thus fully aware, they can act together to change those patterns that oppress them (Dodson Gray, 1989: 86).

Furthermore the power of callers to help one another, without the help of experts, can be seen as particularly important given the established power of the medical profession, a power which some writers have suggested is exercised primarily over women (see for example Davis, 1988). Karpf suggests that phone-ins typecast women 'in the role of people-with-problems' (1980: 51). While this might be true in relation to the question/answer format involving an expert of some sort, as we have already seen The Gerry Ryan Show also offers us the reverse, women who have overcome their problems and are now competent and confident in the role of advice-giver (caller 3; caller 6; caller 22). The emphasis placed on callers' experience of events, rather than on expert advice, can perhaps be seen as involving a reversal of the colonization of the life-world. However, following from Foucault (1977), it might be suggested that these calls simply open up the life-world to another form of surveillance, a form which may be just as oppressive as that exercised by the Catholic Church or medical profession in the past.

However a note of caution must be raised in relation to these calls. Hobson (1980: 113) suggests that such calls could limit action by fooling callers into thinking they have done something simply by voicing the problem, 'the very fact of recognition and seeming discussion or consideration by some 'outside' or 'independent' authority gives an impression that the problems have been aired'. This could prevent the caller from taking any further action that might improve
her situation. Rapping (1991: 38) raises similar issues in a discussion of American television talk shows:

... what's most infuriating about them is not that they are sleazy or in bad taste. It is that they work to co-opt and contain real political change ... They are all talk and no action ... This makes perfect sense. It is the nature of the mass media in a contradictory social environment to take progressive ideas, once they gain strength, and contain them in the large, immobilizing structure of the political status quo.\(^{31}\)

One of the respondents in this study has also pointed out a possible negative effect on the listener of the 'poor auld bitch on the radio' (Caller 16: Dublin woman, working in the home); others' troubles invite the listener to make comparisons with her own life, which could lead her to count her blessings and so ignore her own problems.

The focus on the individual, and the individual's problems may also work to hide the social, political and cultural forces which have caused these problems, or which exasperate them. However, following Fraser (1989), I would argue that these problems, once made public, are increasingly open for critique and contestation. I would agree with O'Connor that talk radio has had an important role to play in 'exposing' private issues to Irish listeners, and that women such as Lavinia Kerwick 'have inadvertently shattered the collusion of silence surrounding various aspects of patriarchal control in the legal, sexual, familial and ideological spheres' (1995: 151).

CONCLUSION

_The Gerry Ryan Show_ allows callers to express an opinion on public matters; it also allows the private to be articulated in a very public forum. This study does not suggest that the show can be seen as part of the public sphere as defined by Habermas, that is as a forum for rational-critical debate. However it does offer a forum where listeners can ‘meet’ and discuss important issues,
although as entertainment is the producers' top priority, the value of this forum is somewhat limited. Whilst recognising these limitations, I would argue that the evidence presented here would not support the view that the listeners and callers to The Gerry Ryan Show can be seen as 'fools'.

It is also significant that both men and women participate in this public discussion. Previous research has found that women reject what they see as masculine genres, for example news, current affairs and political programmes, seeing them as both boring and depressing (see for example Hobson, 1980; O'Connor, 1987; Morley, 1992). Perhaps this female participation can be linked to the format; many of the discussions on The Gerry Ryan Show are grounded in experience, and, from the evidence of this week, it can be argued that more abstract discussion is rare. This can be seen as important change in the rules of the political 'game', given that the differences in men and women's styles of talk, and 'the language people use as they reason usually favors one way of seeing things [i.e. male] and discourages others [i.e. female]' (Fraser, 1993: 119). Women listeners can relate to these topics by taking 'the perspective of the concrete other', by identifying with other callers' stories. This makes these issues relevant, by providing 'elements within the situation to which she can relate' (Hobson, 1980: 112). This could be of particular importance given that it has been argued that Irish women are 'more weakly oriented to the political system' than men, with only 50 percent discussing politics at least occasionally, compared to 68 percent of men (Hardiman and Whelan, 1994: 109).

The Gerry Ryan Show can also be seen as challenging the public/ private divide; topics belonging to both spheres are considered legitimate topics for discussion and are discussed with the same seriousness. From the evidence presented here it would appear that it is overwhelmingly women callers who are involved in this public discussion of private sphere issues. This can be seen as potentially empowering, for both callers and for listeners. As O'Connor has suggested, talk radio provides 'the opportunity for listeners to compare feelings and attitudes about activities, relationships and institutions which, until very recently, were protected by the boundaries of marital loyalty and/or the confessional seal' (1995: 151). It is not clear however what the
consequences of these on-air discussions might be, and whether they will lead to any action, either by callers or by listeners. As Hobson (1980) and Rapping (1991) have suggested, perhaps shows such as *The Gerry Ryan Show* work to contain frustration and anger that might otherwise lead to political action.

In conclusion it can be argued that this study of callers to *The Gerry Ryan Show* would suggest that calling the show is an important social activity, and that this form of participation might have consequences for Irish society, as well as for individual callers; 'public debate is social action, however indirect, having consequences for the zeitgeist of public opinion and social pressure' (Livingstone and Lunt, 1992: 13).
References


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NOTES

I would like to thank Willie O'Reilly, Executive Producer of the show, for all his help with this study. He arranged that a member of the production team would contact callers; the study was explained and callers were asked to give permission for their phone numbers to be passed on to me. The phone numbers of those who gave their consent were then given to me. Respondents were contacted between four and six weeks after their calls to the show and asked if they could suggest a time when they would be free to talk about their call. The majority of interviews were completed then and there, and only two respondents asked me to ring them back at a later stage. The time lapse between the original call and the interview was largely due to the time it took for the production team to contact the eighty three callers in question, and was therefore unavoidable. The interviews were all taped, with the respondents' permission and were transcribed at a later stage. I am indebted to all these respondents for being so generous with their time.

I would also like to gratefully acknowledge a postgraduate essay prize awarded by the Social Science Research Council for an earlier version of this chapter.

1 But see Fletcher, 1995 and O'Connor, 1995 for some discussion of the genre.
2 2FM is RTE's second radio station, and combines Top 40 hits, 'oldies', and Irish pop and rock music. Apart from The Gerry Ryan Show, the focus is on music rather than talk. 2FM is aimed at a younger audience than Radio 1.
3 Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 32-3) use a similar framework in their discussion of television talk shows, and argue that this format shares some characteristics with the public sphere.
4 There has also been work done using a discourse analysis approach to calls to talk radio shows (see for example Moss and Higgins, 1982; Moss and Higgins, 1986; Hutchby, 1991). See also Scannell (1991), for an analysis of on-air talk.
5 For example it could not be argued that callers to The Gerry Ryan Show were calling to fulfill interpersonal needs. Although two callers mentioned that ringing helped combat their loneliness, five callers in the sample had rung from work, while six of those who had called from home mentioned that there had been somebody else there with them when they made their call.
6 All 'ideal types', following Weber (1949).
7 Several writers suggest parallels can be made between radio talk and ordinary conversation (see Scannell, 1991; Hutchby, 1991; Kress, 1986). It would therefore seem legitimate to draw on the work of Jefferson and Lee (1981), in relation to ordinary conversation, to discuss calls to the show.
8 Again I have 'borrowed' this term from conversational analysis.
9 I will only deal with those problems that I feel are directly relevant to this discussion.
10 Habermas has accepted this criticism in recent years (see Habermas, 1993).
11 This can be viewed as a serious obstacle to seeing talk radio as part of the public sphere; in Habermas' model participants bracket their status differences and participate in the debate as equals.
12 I am using Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a normative ideal against which callers'
participation can be compared.

Following from Habermas, the life-world can be defined as that taken for granted mileau of cultural traditions, social solidarities and bodily centered experiences, in which we are always already situated. It is in the lifeworld that mutual understanding and communication are possible. The lifeworld is seen as under threat from system imperitives, for example bureaucratization [political system] and monetarization [economic system]. The threat of encroachment into the lifeworld by these sub-systems is what Habermas terms the colonization of the lifeworld.

To assign an event to the sphere of the private is at once to declare it void of power, and to assign responsibilities to individuals... to classify an event as ... private is to say that individuals have responsibility while offering no social theory that can provide an account beyond that. To classify an event as belonging to the public domain is to assert that it is beyond individual responsibility and within the domain of social control' (Kress, 1986: 400).

'The Family' was a four part drama series written by Irish Booker Prize winning author Roddy Doyle and broadcast on RTE 1 during May 1994. At the time there were some objections both to the language and the brief nude scene in the first episode. This was a topic of discussion on The Gerry Ryan Show the previous week. This call is in relation to the second episode.

I have no evidence to support this caller's claims as I have no observational data from this period to draw on. This incident introduces many questions about the production of the show which are of obvious relevance to my interest in the public sphere, and I accept that this lack of corroborating evidence is problematic. It also must be acknowledged that Gerry Ryan may not have been aware of the 'set-up'.

Another serious challenge to the participation offered by the show comes from a caller who argues that Gerry Ryan does not tolerate callers who do not agree with him, and that he dictates what is said on the air: 'All the people who rang in were basically saying how wonderful this show was ['The Family']. And I really think it was... because Gerry Ryan thought it was a good show' (Caller 23: rural woman, works in the home).

The 5 topics with the most calls over this week were women drivers (19 calls), the World Cup (10 calls), women and body hair (10 calls), questions to an in-studio vet (9 calls) and 'The Family' (8 calls). No other topic involved more than 4 on-air calls and there were 20 topics in total.

The other caller wanted to challenge a point made by a spokesman for the insurance companies, but he was dissatisfied with his call to the show, and felt that he didn't get the point he wanted to make across: 'it just didn't come to me you know ( ) with the pressure on the radio' (Caller 17: Truck driver from Derry).

They make judgements about potential legal problems - slander, libel, contempt of court, whether topics are interesting or uninteresting, whether the caller is articulate or not etc. Balance is another key production value.

I am drawing on conversations with the production team here.

The concept of 'good' radio refers to a set of general assumptions oriented to by media professionals 'when making decisions about... a radio programme' (O'Neill, 1993: 70).

Karpf (1987: 170) argues that radio offers us private women and public men, and that daytime radio 'has a domestic ideology... threaded into its very fabric'. Hobson (1980: 108) suggests that the background chatter of radio DJs works to reinforce 'the dominant ideology of domesticity'.
Although, as mentioned already, the average 1/4 hour audience for The Gerry Ryan Show is 57 percent female and 43 percent male, it must be pointed out that housewives are seen by Irish radio stations as their target audience: 'Station after station wanted it known how well they were doing among this audience, listening to music and advertisements, and making decisions as to how the family will spend its disposable income' (Foley, 1994). It might be expected that priority is given to attracting this powerful consumer group.

See Weatherill, who also raises the question of stigma: 'There's an insistence on transparency in all things which I think is destructive from a psychotherapeutic point of view. It might be alright for Princess Diana to tell everybody she suffered from bulimia, but for someone less famous than she is that still carries a stigma' (cited in McNally, 1995: 13).

Of course not all female callers would ring the show with a problem, though six female respondents say that they would. However those that would not call are not so outraged by the question. For example two respondents simply mention that they would be embarrassed to ring the show with a problem, while three other respondents say that they would be afraid someone might recognise them on-air.

Parallels can be drawn with Levin's (1987: 26) findings here: 'Talk radio in this posture is enormously reaffirming. The number of people who wish to help is large and their reservoir of good will seems unbounded. It is here that one senses the essence of a true community'.

As this quote might suggest, in an Irish context it was the Catholic Church who traditionally exercised control over women's bodies, and regulated sexual activity. In recent years this 'moral monopoly', has been challenged, particularly by the mass media: 'The media have lifted the veil of silence which previously shrouded moral issues. Discussions on sexuality and sexual morality... have been removed from the dark confines of the confessional and brought to the forefront of public debate' (Inglis, 1987: 90).

On July 15 1992 Lavinia Kerwick rang the show in despair the day after the man who had pleaded guilty to her rape walked free from the Central Criminal Court, with only a suspended sentence. She spoke on-air about the rape and subsequently appeared on The Nine O'Clock News, where she appealed to the Minister of Justice for a retrial. Following a public outcry Padraig Flynn, the then Minister for Justice, met with her on several occasions. This case is thus considered to have had considerable influence on the Criminal Justice Act drafted by Padraig Flynn in 1993.

Of course it must be acknowledged that the opening up of the private sphere was not the invention of the feminist movement, but, following Habermas, can be linked to the development of the welfare state, where 'the private becomes social' (Carpignano et al, 1990: 52).

This echoes Radway's findings in relation to romance reading, an activity she describes as both combative and compensatory. While the readers enjoy reading these novels, and relish this time away from their husbands and children, it must also be noted that 'romance reading ... supplies vicariously those very needs and requirements that might otherwise be formulated as demands in the real world' (1987: 23).

This is a question that I hope to address with further research on callers to the show.